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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION: HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

Implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/105

Note by the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 50/105 of 20 December 1996, the General Assembly took note with appreciation of the report of the Secretary-General on developing human resources for development (HRD) (A/50/330 and Corr.1). The report proposed a broader, more cross-sectoral approach to HRD than has traditionally been its interpretation in the past (e.g. vocational training), with a special focus on inter-ministerial (and inter-agency) coordination in HRD programme design and delivery. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-second session on the implementation of resolution 50/105, concentrating on further action taken by the United Nations system with regard to HRD and, especially, to the enhancement of inter-agency coordination.

2. Two significant and relevant developments have taken place since the adoption of the resolution, both of which are either ongoing or very recent and which have a direct impact on the substance and process of HRD within the United Nations system: (a) the active efforts under way within the system to coordinate assistance to countries in the follow-up to the major global conferences held during the 1990s, and (b) the package of United Nations system reform proposals announced by the Secretary-General on 16 July 1997, which are now being implemented throughout the system, as well as within mechanisms such as the United Nations development group structure.

3. The relevant cross-reference inter-agency collaboration started with the World Conference on Education for All, held at Jomtein, Thailand, in 1990,[1] where the world's attention was drawn to meeting basic learning needs, and on what took place in the classroom, rather than just on enrolment figures, per se, and continued through major United Nations conferences held at Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen, Cairo, Beijing and Rome, at which various aspects of HRD were addressed. What emerged as critical for the United Nations system was a

collective acknowledgement of the conceptual integration needed to interpret the commitments made and the agreements reached at those conferences, as well as a clear framework for concerted action in such programmatic areas as HRD.

4. In 1995 inter-agency task forces were established that have brought a new era to inter-agency cooperation in the United Nations system. Especially relevant to HRD implementation is the folding together of educational and health sector concerns into Commitment VI of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development,[2] adopted at the World Summit for Social Development. This has elicited important cooperative interaction between the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in key international forums related to HRD, such as the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, coordinated by UNESCO in collaboration with other EFA (education for all) sponsoring agencies. Moreover the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), for which provisional guidelines were published in August 1997, is another major contribution to country-level follow-up. In addition, further aspects of integrated HRD have gained strength from these conferences, such as the emphasis on enhanced participation of civil society in governance systems and a perspective of basic social services as an integrated continuum across several sectors. The work of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Basic Social Services, led by the United Nations Population Fund has given new operational meaning to this more intersectoral approach through country studies and several discrete products, such as comprehensive indices of progress contained in the "Wallchart on Indicators of Basic Social Services". The 20/20 principle, strengthened by the Oslo Consensus in 1996, is also beginning to become operational in several countries through the work of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other United Nations agencies, with the key support of the Norwegian and other Governments.

5. Several innovative themes, running through the United Nations conferences that have been held since 1990, bear directly on HRD policies and practice. There is general acknowledgement of the unsustainability of current production and consumption patterns in both the North and South, necessitating a reappraisal of the purpose of those HRD institutions which perpetuate such patterns. The concept of sustainable livelihoods for all, but in particular for those living in poverty, offers a fresh, useful framework for development strategies that can guide HRD and can address some of the shortcomings of earlier HRD strategies.

6. While integrated HRD has in the past focused on bringing together existing approaches across sectors, the need to improve livelihoods and to facilitate ways of making a living that are more sustainable for all people requires different, more holistic thinking - looking at relevant sectors and cross-cutting themes (e.g technology, information, access to assets) from a system perspective and from the outset. Where former HRD approaches have generally concentrated on policies at national levels, strategies for sustainable livelihoods must be grounded in local communities and governance structures, with full involvement of key representatives of civil society in transparent respect for unique geopolitical and cultural settings and diversity. Yet the value-added of the sustainable livelihoods approach is its overarching conceptual structure. Agenda 21 stated that sustainable livelihoods can serve

as "an integrating factor that allows policies to address ... development, sustainable resource management and poverty eradication simultaneously".[3]

7. At both the World Summit for Social Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, note was taken of the need for a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of changes in the workplace. In addition, the significance of linkages between sustainability, employment, gender, HRD and poverty eradication for policy formulation and programming was underscored. Operational progress on these fronts has also been complemented with relevant policy research. For example, led by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Inter-Agency Task Force on Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods was established. On the basis of seven country studies carried out by various United Nations agencies, the Task Force endorsed and recognized crucial links between livelihoods and employment and proposed that future United Nations programming activities build on those linkages as a means to eliminating poverty.

8. Ideas such as sustainable livelihoods, as put forward by UNDP, offer potentially fresh meaning and direction to HRD, particularly as regards anti-poverty strategies. But these are new concepts, only just beginning to be examined and made operational by countries and United Nations agencies. Initial, preparatory definitions of the term "sustainable livelihoods" have been proposed in a note prepared by UNDP for the Inter-Agency Task Force on Employment and Sustainable Livelihoods and a background paper prepared by UNDP entitled "Productive employment and poverty eradication: how can livelihoods be more sustainable?", which was submitted to the Commission for Social Development. But systematic incorporation of such ideas into HRD programming is only embryonic at present.

9. Collectively, the concepts and factors affecting integrated HRD strategies and, thus, the implementation of Assembly resolution 50/105 signify deep and formative changes in the way the United Nations system assists countries in human resources development. The substantive contributions must be carefully assessed by focusing on how people can most effectively prepare themselves for and then develop more sustainable livelihoods, and on what policies and programmes can best facilitate that process. The implications for the United Nations system reforms of more cohesive and coordinated programmes and support at the national level must also be addressed.

10. In light of these new developments, it is suggested that this note should serve as an interim update for the Assembly at this time, but that more detailed reporting on the implementation of resolution 50/105 should take explicitly into account the key new factors identified above. Thus, the Assembly might wish to consider recommending that a comprehensive and intersectoral review of the implementation of resolution 50/105 be undertaken during 1997/98, with express reference to the United Nations system reforms and to other major substantive HRD initiatives currently under way or contemplated by the organizations of the United Nations system.

Notes

[1] See Final Report of the World Conference on Education for All: Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990, Inter-Agency Commission (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank) for the World Conference on Education for All, New York, 1990, appendix I.

[2] Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995 (A/CONF.166/9) (United Nations publication, Sales No. 96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

[3] Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992 (A/CONF.151/26/Rev.1) (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8), vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference, resolution 1, annex II, paragraph 3.4.